

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL SOUKUP, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, NATURAL RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP AND SCIENCE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS, OF THE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK BISON.

MARCH 20, 2007

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on Yellowstone National Park Bison. Accompanying me today is Suzanne Lewis, Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park.

In December 2000, after nearly a decade of negotiation and planning, the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior, and the Governor of Montana signed Records of Decision to implement the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) for the State of Montana and Yellowstone National Park. The IBMP directs the National Park Service (NPS), Gallatin National Forest, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to cooperate with the State of Montana in implementing management operations to preserve the largest wild, free-ranging population of bison while minimizing the risk of brucellosis disease transmission between bison and cattle. Brucellosis is a contagious bacterial disease that can infect domestic animals, wildlife, and humans. Brucellosis was first found in the Yellowstone bison herd in 1917 and was most likely acquired from domestic cattle. Potential transmission of brucellosis back to cattle from bison has been a concern of the cattle industry, and the Montana cattle industry has worked hard to maintain brucellosis-free status for its cattle herds.

Through various adaptive management techniques, the IBMP is designed to progress through a series of management steps that initially allow only bison that test negative for brucellosis on winter range areas outside the national park, but will eventually allow limited numbers of any bison on public land within management areas covered by the IBMP during winter when cattle are not present.

The agency partners conducted reviews of the IBMP in 2005, 2006, and 2007. These reviews have identified and implemented several adaptive management adjustments to the IBMP including increased tolerance for bull bison outside the park, and increased flexibility of bison hazing. Additionally, a bison vaccination program has been initiated for captured bison.

The NPS is currently developing an Environmental Impact Statement for comprehensive remote bison vaccination that will not require capture of bison. Spatial and temporal separation of bison and cattle has been strengthened by improved interagency cooperation during hazing and capture operations. The State of Montana is collaborating with APHIS to develop protocols for certifying some Yellowstone bison as brucellosis free so they can be used to improve the genetics in other federal and State bison populations. In 2005, Montana reauthorized a public hunt of Yellowstone bison on lands adjacent to the park.

When the IBMP went into effect in 2000, the bison population was approximately 2,500 animals. Currently, the bison population is estimated at approximately 3,600 animals. During winter 2005-2006, the bison population was reduced from 4,900 to 3,400 when, after the park conducted numerous non-lethal hazing operations along the northern boundary, and when hazing

became infeasible and unsafe to prevent bison from leaving the park's northern boundary and entering private lands occupied by cattle, the park captured 1,249 bison. Of these, 87 were provided for approved research, 305 were released back into the park, 849 were consigned to slaughter, and there were 8 mortalities inside the capture facility. As happens every winter, many additional bison die of natural causes including predation. Sending so many bison to slaughter under the IBMP was difficult for the Park Service, but capture of these bison was necessary to prevent commingling and probable disease transmission to cattle grazing on lands adjacent to parks.

In an effort to progress to the later, more flexible bison management stages established under the IBMP, the NPS continues to support the leadership of the State of Montana to conduct negotiations that could lead to acquisition of cattle grazing rights on lands adjacent to the park and thus provide additional habitat for bison outside the park. The Royal Teton Ranch (RTR), USDA Forest Service, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks are currently in renewed discussions about new opportunities for grazing rights acquisitions on part or all of RTR lands. While the NPS is not a principal party in these negotiations, at the request of the State of Montana, park staff participated in discussions about the potential value of all or part of these lands as bison habitat. The RTR retains grazing rights, where they currently graze approximately 120 head of cattle, on their private property adjacent to Yellowstone National Park as provided for under the 1999 land acquisition and conservation easement agreement.

The NPS continues to meet with IBMP partners, private landowners, and the State of Montana to seek opportunities to advance these discussions, and to identify and implement progressive and more bison-friendly adaptive management approaches.

Bison management actions under the IBMP have not had an adverse impact on long-term bison population viability. This bison population exhibits a robust, long-term population growth of 8-13 percent per year. The IBMP includes bison population management objectives that are intended to ensure long-term conservation of this unique bison population and their significant genetic variation. A decision by the NPS to capture bison only arises when all other options are exhausted. Any subsequent decision to consign captured bison to slaughter is very difficult, and is influenced by an interest in minimizing captivity and human-dependence of these wild bison as well as the requirements of the IBMP. Despite the periodic capture and removal of some bison, the NPS believes that the IBMP is a successful long-term strategy for safeguarding and protecting the Yellowstone bison population.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.